Introduction

Human trafficking is envisaged as modern slavery and, as a form of organized crime, it has been an unending human security concern in modern human civilization.\(^1\) The South Asian region is a vast source of human trafficking in general while Bangladesh, though a small country, constitutes an enormous share of trafficking victims in the region. More than 150,000 South Asians fall victim to human trafficking each year, making South Asian states, including Bangladesh, profoundly worried.\(^2\) Around 32,000 Bangladeshis, of whom roughly 20,000 are women, are trafficked each year.\(^3\) These victims are forced to engage in the sex industry, forced into bonded labor, sold as domestic servants, or traded in the human-organ market.\(^4\) Given the situation of human trafficking in Bangladesh, the 2020 Trafficking in Persons Report of the U.S. Department of State listed the country in the Tier 2 category.\(^5\) Ranking a country in this category indicates that its government does not act in complete accordance with the standards of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, but is seriously attempting to comply with its standards.\(^6\)

Few research articles regarding human trafficking in Bangladesh have emerged over the years. Rahman argues that trafficking is a grave security concern for Bangladesh due to its uncontrollable nature and its proximity to transnational crimes and illegal migrations.\(^7\) Rahman and Ruhi explore the factors responsible for causing trafficking in persons given the socio-political and economic landscapes of the country.\(^8\)

In survey research, Abdul, Joarder, and Miller highlight the experiences of trafficked migrants who returned to Bangladesh after working in foreign countries.\(^9\) Most respondents regardless of gender pointed out that their required travel documents were forged and that they endured inhospitable working conditions, while almost every female migrant experienced sexual abuse.\(^10\) Likewise, Paul and Hasnath portray what cruel experiences trafficked persons encounter in foreign countries.\(^11\) They identify the weakness and discrepancies in responses against trafficking at the national level of Bangladesh and the regional level of South Asia.\(^12\)
However, a crucial yet unexplored area of research is the types of violence that Bangladeshi women experience during trafficking. Thus, this study aims to apply a feminist human-security framework to their experiences. Using the feminist human-security framework, it also explores the roles of different actors and factors in the trafficking of Bangladeshi women.

Before proceeding to the central discussion, it is crucial to understand human trafficking and to clarify its relationship with gender and smuggling. Human trafficking lacks a satisfying universal definition, with differences between national and international definitions creating barriers to coordinated and effective responses. The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children (UN TIP Protocol) provides a broad definition of human trafficking: “… the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion… for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include… sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs”.

The UN Protocol’s definition emphasizes three particular aspects: sexual and labor exploitation and the removal of organs. However, the removal of organs is not found in some countries’ own definitions of human trafficking. For example, the government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh enacted the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act in 2012 without pointing out the removal of organs. As such, the Act defines human trafficking as the trading and deporting of a deceived person inside or outside the country for the purpose of sexual and labor exploitation or other forms of exploitation.

The UN Protocol and Bangladesh’s 2012 Act deem trafficking as a crime and point out that exploitation is its perennial character. Likewise, Watson and Silkston posit that trafficking implies the transfer of people by deceptive means for profitable exploitation.

Gender is a key factor in exploitation during trafficking, which can be a form of gender-based violence, comprising any acts of verbal, physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. According to a report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, women constitute 70 percent of victims of human trafficking while men make up 30 percent internationally. Indeed, women become easy prey to traffickers due to gender-based discrimination in education, wages and employment, marital abandonment, poverty, and domestic violence in society.

Human trafficking should not be confused with human smuggling. The UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air defines the latter as the illegal yet voluntary entry of a person with the assistance of smugglers into a foreign country where he/she is not a citizen. The key difference between trafficking and smuggling is that the former is based on force while the latter is based on consent. Thus, trafficking is a crime against a person whereas smuggling can be a crime against a state. Smuggling, nonetheless, often turns into trafficking when a smuggled person is forcefully exploited for labor or sex trade. Therefore, the UN needs to provide an unequivocal definition of human trafficking because an explicit distinction between trafficking and smuggling will support compatible assistance programs and effective judicial processes in a country.

The study proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the analytical framework of feminist human security with cohesive indicators. Second, it provides an overview of the methodology. Third, it explores the factors triggering the trafficking of Bangladeshi women. Fourth, it investigates the roles of non-state actors in the trafficking of women in Bangladesh. Fifth,
it critically examines the roles of Bangladesh’s government in preventing the trafficking of the country’s women. Finally, it recapitulates the arguments made in the study and provides recommendations to improve the human security of Bangladeshi women.

**Analytical Framework: A Feminist Human Security Perspective**

Over the past decades, the concept of human security has continued to be developed by international organizations, scholars, and practitioners. The 1994 Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme introduced the concept of human security as the safety of people from chronic threats and protection from harmful interruptions in everyday life.\(^2^1\) The report has pointed out security threats stemming from food, environment, economy, and health, and threats impacting our personal (physical), community, and political security.\(^2^2\) In 2012, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 66/290, which states that human security implies the right of every person to live with dignity and “freedom from fear and want”, and equal opportunities to enjoy his/her rights and realize his/her full potential as a human being.\(^2^3\)

Nonetheless, there are three camps in human security. The first camp considers human security as a basic individual right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that the government of each country has an international obligation to protect these rights.\(^2^4\) The second camp is humanitarian, emphasizing international institutional and legal efforts to better international laws and regulations, particularly concerning war crimes and genocides.\(^2^5\) The third camp views the human security issue from a global perspective. Scholars of this perspective argue that globalization, the global economy, and the global health environment impact the security of individuals.\(^2^6\)

In human security scholarship, gender perspectives have been underemphasized while pundits of traditional security have predominantly centered their scholarship on security threats to the state, which mainly derive from foreign states. Muthien posits that traditional security generally focuses on military war, thereby ignoring the everyday security needs and concerns of women.\(^2^7\)

The feminist perspective is crucial in human security since women are victims of different types of crime and violence compared to men. Feminists contend that from a normative perspective, human trafficking is above all a violation of human rights.\(^2^8\) They also believe that the trafficking of women must be understood in light of a gendered social order cultivating an uneven power relationship between men and women.\(^2^9\)

From the human security perspective, people are the target of violence in general whereas, from the feminist perspective, women are the primary targets of violence since they are more vulnerable given their material and political positions in society.\(^3^0\) McKay divides violence into its direct and indirect forms.\(^3^1\) Direct violence implies physical violence to individuals.\(^3^2\) Indirect violence, which is often intractable, is embedded in social structures and normalized by institutions of societies and states.\(^3^3\)

Based on the above discussion, this study falls into the third camp of human security and argues that the safety of individuals is the key to global security. To better analyze the case of Bangladesh, the research employs a feminist human security perspective with the modification of the direct and indirect violence thesis provided by McKay.\(^3^4\) The analytical framework is summarized in Table 1 below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Direct (physical) violence</th>
<th>Indirect (structural) violence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-state actors</td>
<td><strong>Type 1</strong> Direct violence (for example, harassment, injury, forced labor, forced organ harvesting, rape, and murder) from non-state actors such as organized crime groups</td>
<td><strong>Type 2</strong> Indirect violence (for example, poor health environment, lack of food, water, and housing, forced marriage) caused by non-state actors such as organized crime groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State actors</td>
<td><strong>Type 3</strong> Direct violence (for example, harassment, injury, rape, and physical assaults) from state actors such as police officers, military personnel, and government workers</td>
<td><strong>Type 4</strong> Indirect violence (for example, lack of access to education, health care, religious service, political rights, and gender justice) caused by state actors such as decision-making government authority within political and economic systems</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Feminist human security analytical framework (Source: Based on data compiled by the authors)

To operationalize the variables of the research, indicators are designed to capture the concept in the analytical framework. Direct (physical) violence refers to the acts of harming the victims physically in various forms (for example, harassment, injury, rape, murder, etc.). Indirect (structural) violence refers to the systemic unfavorable situations in the victims’ living areas, including lack of access to education, food and water, housing, health care, religious service, political rights, and gender justice, forced marriage, etc. Non-state actors refer to any individuals or groups that are not part of or affiliated with Bangladesh’s government. State actors refer to any individuals or groups that are part of or affiliated with Bangladesh’s government.

**Methodology**

**Data Collection**

This research is based on a qualitative exploratory single-case study on the trafficking of women in Bangladesh and uses both primary and secondary data. The case study method has been applied to understand the types of violence experienced by the trafficked women of Bangladesh and the roles of different actors and factors in trafficking. There are myriad sources of data collection in a qualitative case study that expose multifaceted aspects of a selected case.35

Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with 24 female participants aged between 23 and 41 who were previously trafficked to India, Pakistan, or Middle Eastern countries. An open-ended interview questionnaire was used to explore and understand the experiences of the trafficked victims. Before the interview, the consent of each interviewee was taken to record the conversation. For the study, we communicated with the Program Officer of the Bangladesh Women's Foundation. She provided us with important information about some potential respondents. We interviewed nine of them and then employed the snowball sampling technique to select the remaining participants. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where research subjects help
researchers to reach and recruit other subjects for a study.

Madaripur (an administrative district of Bangladesh) was selected as the data collection site. Interviews were conducted in four Upazilas (sub-districts) of Madaripur – Madaripur Sadar, Shibchar, Kalkini, and Rajoir, from each of which 6 participants were selected. According to Bangladesh’s Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), approximately 105,593 people from Madaripur migrated abroad as laborers from 2005 to 2017, placing it in the top 20 migrant-sending districts of Bangladesh.\(^3^6\) Madaripur is also listed among the top ten districts of the country in sending women abroad.\(^3^7\) Human trafficking in the district is also growing rapidly.\(^3^8\)

To support the aims of the study, secondary data were also collected from the United Nations report, the U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report, news and NGO reports, government publications, books, journals, and magazines.

**Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the interview data. It consists of a list of themes a researcher anticipates exploring from the collected data.\(^3^9\) In doing so, data preparing and organizing, data coding, generating data themes, interrelating themes, and interpreting the meaning of themes were cautiously carried out to make the meaning of the data more comprehensible to readers.

Recorded interviews were first transcribed into the native language (Bangla) of the respondents. Following this, data were translated into English and then coded. The coding of qualitative data generates systematic and in-depth analysis and assists in revealing the underlying meaning of every qualitative response.\(^4^0\) Open coding of suitable and crucial words, phrases, sentences, and sections was carried out in the written transcripts of the recorded data to identify themes for analysis. The themes were labeled and then interpreted to generate the major results of the study. Although all the respondents of the study underwent different experiences, their narratives corresponded with thematic constructions.

**Findings and Discussion**

**Factors Triggering the Trafficking of Bangladeshi Women**

Human trafficking is an intractable crime posing serious challenges for Bangladesh’s government to address. If actual factors triggering trafficking can be identified, they can be tackled effectively and efficiently. Factors are divided into demand and supply sides in Table 2. The demand side mainly reflects the external dimension of the trafficking of women on a global level, while the supply side indicates the internal dimension of trafficking in Bangladesh.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor category</th>
<th>Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demand side</td>
<td>Booming sex industry, forced labor, increasing need for women in domestic work, and human organ business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supply side</td>
<td>Poverty, unemployment, patriarchal social norms, domestic violence, economic bondage, lack of education and advanced work skill, and natural calamities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2. The demand-supply factors for the trafficking of Bangladeshi women (Source: Based on data compiled by the authors)**

On the demand side, globalization – which promotes a free market economy and eases the movement of people, goods, technology, and ideas across state borders – plays a prominent role in trafficking.
Women have been commoditized in the labor and sex markets of the capitalist global economy where they are purchased and put on sale and resale as modern slaves as long as they have commercial productivity. U.S. Congressman Chris Smith contends that the market demand for prostitution is a major reason behind the trafficking of women. As stated earlier, around 20,000 women from Bangladesh are trafficked around the world annually – namely to India and Pakistan, and Middle Eastern countries – and many of them become the victims of sex trafficking. The trafficked women are also often subjected to forced labor without due pay in underground mining, narcotic farming or production, and work in hazardous environments, which severely damage their health and reduce their longevity. Any kind of forced labor violates the bodily autonomy of a person and makes him/her disempowered.

The interviews revealed that all of the participants were lured with the promise of better jobs and higher living standards by the traffickers, but they were forced into prostitution, domestic servitude, or agricultural or mining work without due salary. This can be seen in the following quote from Interviewee no. 23. “I was looking for a job after my husband died of cancer… My brother-in-law offered me a restaurant chef job in Delhi, India, and I accepted it. He handed over me along with some girls to two unfamiliar men… We were taken to Delhi where I was segregated from the other and was confined for forced prostitution. With the help of a sex client, I escaped and was rescued by a women’s rights organization that helped me to return to Bangladesh…” (Interviewee no. 23, personal communication, November 26, 2021).

The excerpt reveals how the demand for sexual services results in the trafficking of individuals like her. Moreover, a study conducted by Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program, a Bangladesh-based migration and advocacy research organization, has found that 86 percent of the study’s subjects (110 trafficked women) who were able to return to Bangladesh did not get their full remuneration, 61 percent experienced physical tortures, 24 percent did not get sufficient daily foods, and 14 percent underwent sexual abuses in their forced labor works. When trafficked women lose their productive value of either labor or sex they are often traded to organ business groups for kidneys, eyes, livers, and other organs. Though there is inadequate data regarding this issue, it cannot be ruled out as the trafficked victims leave no reliable evidence of their death after organ removals. The UN Protocol clearly states that exploitation in trafficking includes the removal of organs of trafficked persons. According to the World Health Organization, around 10,000 underground market operations in human organs occur annually. The human organ business involving human trafficking is also a lucrative part of the black market. In 2017, Pakistan’s police raided a private clinic and arrested five medical personnel preparing to perform organ harvesting operations on three people, among whom one was a trafficked Bangladeshi woman, and the rest were Pakistani men.

On the supply side, factors need to be understood because a combination of two or more factors makes Bangladeshi women susceptible to traffickers. Compared to men, women in Bangladesh are unprivileged in accessing economic, political, social, and educational resources, causing them to be more vulnerable to traffickers. In particular, the age-old hegemonic patriarchal norms of Bangladesh encourage them to solely take on the roles of reproduction and homemaking and discourage them from engaging in public life. Indeed, the 2018 Gender Inequality Index ranked Bangladesh 129th out of 162 countries. The following excerpt from Interviewee no. 10 is pertinent to mention here. “…I was convinced by traffickers to go to India for better income because I had no alternative. My family stopped my education and made my early
marriage… After my divorce, my family did not accept me congenially…” (Interviewee no. 10, personal communication, November 28, 2021).

As of 2020, women in Bangladesh accounted for around 31 percent of the entire workforce, demonstrating not just discriminatory recruitment and gender preference in the country’s employment system, but also their lack of education and skills. Apart from this, a survey from UNICEF on trafficked women ranging from ages 17-32 in ten villages in Bangladesh found that 95 percent of this age group was illiterate.

Further, around 21 percent of people in Bangladesh live below the national poverty line, according to the 2019 estimation of the Asian Development Bank. Poverty mostly harms women compared to men and thereby it has become feminized. To make matters worse, when women become widowed due to domestic violence, experience marital separation, or experience marital abandonment, many of them confront serious economic hardships. To improve their financial capacity, traffickers or loan-giving organizations provide them with debt that locks them into economic bondage. Traffickers attempt to exploit this condition of women and persuade them to go abroad so that they can pay off their debt and become financially prosperous. The following verbatim from Interviewee no. 12 can explain it better.

“My marriage with my husband did not last more than half a year because of his violent behavior. After the divorce, I was not well-accepted by my parents… I failed to manage to get a job due to my lack of education and skills. My paternal uncle proposed me a gardener job in Saudi Arabia… Reaching Saudi Arabia, I ended up as a domestic servant to a cruel house owner. I underwent a severe physical illness there and was admitted in a hospital from where I escaped… I returned to Bangladesh in 2019…” (Interviewee no. 12, personal communication, December 7, 2021)

This excerpt highlights how domestic violence can lead to divorce and economic hardship if they do not have support, education, and proper job skills, the lack of which can make them easy prey to traffickers.

In addition, Bangladesh is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world due to its disadvantageous geographical location and dense population. In 2016, a study by the Bangladesh Institute of Social Research Trust found that the country’s female population is more vulnerable to natural disasters, and they constitute around 70 percent of the total displaced people of Bangladesh. During natural disasters, the suffering of girls and women is compounded if they belong to a lower socio-economic group, especially in the context of the Global South. It can be found in the words of Interviewee no. 5.

“In 2007 when Cyclone Sidr struck southern Bangladesh, our family became destitute… A well-known neighbor convinced my older father to migrate my sister and me in Oman with a promise of beauty parlor jobs. After taken in Oman, we were, however, forced into domestic servitudes in two different houses. Though I escaped the inhuman treatment of my house owner and came back in Bangladesh with the help of Bangladesh’s embassy in Oman in 2014, the whereabouts of my sister are still unknown to me…” (Interviewee no. 5, personal communication, November 14, 2021)

The above case articulates that when a family falls into serious economic troubles and concomitantly does not have males able to earn an income, females can be encouraged to seek outside employment. And disaster-affected women undergo more economic troubles and often need to earn for their families, thereby becoming extremely susceptible to traffickers.

This section has clarified that a combination of factors from the demand and supply sides causes the trafficking of
women in Bangladesh. The following section will look at the role of non-state actors in trafficking Bangladeshi women.

The Role of Non-state Actors in Trafficking Bangladeshi Women

Human trafficking is an organized crime, and a trafficking network is business-oriented by nature since everything is calculated with the goal of profit maximization. Richmond argues that the principal cause of trafficking is traffickers who always seek to exploit vulnerable situations of people for financial gain. The process of trafficking is complicated and sophisticated. As shown in Figure 1 below, the trafficking of women can take place in two ways in Bangladesh.

Figure 1: Two-way trafficking of girls and women (Source: Based on field data and data compiled by the authors)

On the one hand, brokers of traffickers start the initial process of trafficking. The brokers are familiar to the would-be trafficked women, and their familiarity gives them access to their targets. The brokers look for women who are socially and economically disadvantaged in society and who are then offered jobs abroad with lucrative salaries. After they are convinced to accept the offer, the brokers take them to the traffickers who, in turn, transfer them to the trafficking or criminal syndicate.

On the other hand, traffickers can play a direct role in the first stage of luring women into trafficking, and so do not employ brokers in this context. Traffickers directly traffic women and then transfer them to the trafficking/criminal syndicate. Since traffickers are not always familiar to female victims, they might employ several strategies to appear credible and accessible to their targets.

First, some traffickers have weaponized marriage for trafficking poor girls after marrying them. For example, Monirul Islam Monir married 75 poor girls and individually took his wives to India where he sold them into brothels. The Indian police have recently arrested him. Furthermore, nearly 450 tribal girls from remote areas of Bangladesh were trafficked in China in the last 5 years through marriage traps. A police investigation found that 10 Bangladeshi matrimonial organizations were involved in the trafficking, offering marriage proposals to the tribal girls on the behalf of Chinese male citizens. The Chinese men married those girls who accepted the proposals, took the new brides into China, and sold them to sex traders.

Second, traffickers use the social media platform TikTok to lure younger girls belonging to lower socio-economic groups in Bangladesh. They maintain Facebook groups that add young female TikTokers who are then offered well-paid jobs and opportunities to be TikTok stars in India. Indeed, the use of TikTok in trafficking girls has come into the limelight in 2021, when an investigation of a video clip of an alleged sexual assault of a Bangladeshi girl in India linked the incident to a transnational trafficking gang. Through the use of
TikTok, over 1,500 girls have been trafficked from Bangladesh to India in recent years.\textsuperscript{63}

Finally, traffickers operate dance clubs that particularly encourage lower socio-economic girls to enroll. They offer girls jobs in entertainment industries in foreign countries.\textsuperscript{64} For instance, Bangladesh’s Criminal Investigation Department detained award-winning film choreographer Ivan Shahriar Sohag who owns two dance clubs which, in collaboration with business tycoon Azam Khan, is accused of trafficking 1,000 Bangladeshi women to Dubai.\textsuperscript{65} In this context, the experience of Interviewee no. 18 can provide clear insight. “I wanted to be a dancer celebrity and got admitted in a Dhaka-based dance club... I felt ecstatic when I was offered by my dance master that I would join in a Dubai dance club... On reaching Dubai, I found that I was cheated. I was forced to prostitution for 3 months in a hotel. Then, the traffickers sent me back to my country...” (Interviewee no. 18, personal communication, November 5, 2021).

In both methods of trafficking (\textit{Figure 1}), though the trafficking/criminal syndicate is placed on the top, traffickers or their brokers are the key agents who are familiar to the would-be trafficked girls/women and who initiate the process of trafficking. However, though law enforcement agencies, politicians, and lawmakers are not directly part of the process of trafficking, they are highly crucial for its success.\textsuperscript{66} The traffickers receive strategic support from those who have an influence on the legal and administrative system of Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{67} In this regard, the trafficking recruitment system is not completely independent; its power stems from outside the trafficking ring. In each of the methods of trafficking, familiarity appears vital because it generates credibility of the traffickers and their brokers to the would-be trafficked girls/women of conservative Bangladesh.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Relationship} & \textbf{Number} \\
\hline
Husband & 01 \\
Family relatives & 11 \\
Relatives of family relatives & 07 \\
Community neighbors & 05 \\
\hline
Total & 24 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Relationship between the respondents (trafficked women) and members of trafficking gang (Source: Based on field data)}
\end{table}

Among the 24 respondents of the study, the most frequent brokers were their family relatives (11) who were almost numerically equal to the rest of the combined number of husband (01), relatives of family relatives (07), and community neighbors (05).

Trafficked women undergo different forms of violence that are closely associated with trafficking from the very beginning. It was found that all of the participants of the study experienced direct and indirect violence. In the context of direct violence, sexual exploitation and physical coercion are highly common.\textsuperscript{68} If the women are immediately sold into brothels, they are often forced to take sedative drugs to break their physical resistance to client sex or sexual violence.\textsuperscript{69} In terms of indirect violence, the trafficked women experience a filthy environment during the transition period of their travel and this continues when they are sold to pimps or forced labor syndicates. They do not get adequate food, healthy shelter for survival, or health facilities.\textsuperscript{70} Direct and indirect violence is intertwined because when a woman undergoes direct violence such as physical
coercion or sexual exploitation, she concomitantly experiences indirect violence like an unhygienic environment, insufficient food, deprivation of health facilities, and forced marriage. An excerpt from Interviewee no. 26 is vital to mention here. “I experienced psychological fear and sexual molestation and got insufficient food and dirty house during my journey into Mumbai and after I was sold to pimps there” (Interviewee no. 26, personal communication, November 5, 2021).

This section has discussed that trafficking rings are complex and transnationally organized, and traffickers use the strategy of familiarity-induced credibility. Trafficked women are always subject to direct and indirect violence. The next parts of the study will examine whether or not the role of Bangladesh’s government in preventing the trafficking of women is adequate and effective.

The Role of Bangladesh’s Government in Preventing the Trafficking of Women

Human trafficking has posed a significant challenge to the government of Bangladesh for decades. Its response is so far insufficient and ineffective in several contexts, which gives traffickers needed opportunities to continue their illicit network in the country.

Per Figure 2, Bangladesh was placed into the Tier-2 category from 2013 to 2016. In the next three consecutive years, its ranking position fell to the Tier-2 Watch List category while in 2020 the country was able to reinstate its previous Tier-2 ranking position.71 This implies that the government of Bangladesh is not fully following the prescribed standards to prevent human trafficking, though it is attempting to take important steps against its expansion.

Figure 2: Bangladesh’s human trafficking tier ranking by the U.S. Department of State in the last eight years

To critically examine the government’s role in fighting against female trafficking, a critical look into the existing laws, judicial system, law enforcement agencies, and politicians of Bangladesh can provide some vital insights. The government of Bangladesh enacted the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act in 2012, which posits that human trafficking is the trading and deporting of a deceived person inside or outside Bangladesh for the purpose of sexual and labor exploitation or other forms of exploitation.73 As prescribed in the 2012 Act, the government set up anti-trafficking tribunals in all administrative divisions of Bangladesh except Mymensingh in 2020 to prosecute human trafficking cases. These special tribunals have replaced the Women Violence Protection Tribunal that had previously managed trafficking cases of women and drawn criticism for not having expert prosecutors on such criminal cases.74

Undeniably, the 2012 human trafficking Act of Bangladesh is a sign of determination by the country to fight against traffickers, but the limits and ineffectiveness of the judicial system could not translate the government’s objectives into reality. Criminalizing the trafficking of a person for sex, labor, or other exploitative purposes, the 2012 Act penalizes criminals with a five-year sentence and a fine of not less than $595.75 The Act’s increased sentences are commendable, but the implementation of the provisions of the Act is sluggish. The experience of Interviewee no, 19 is pertinent to mention here.
“With the persuasion of a local politician, I went into Qatar in 2017 to change my destiny after my husband abandoned me… I was taken there for prostitution… I escaped and came into Bangladesh in 2018 with the help of an international NGO… I filed a case in court against the local politician for compensation. The accused is moving freely and there is no progress in the case. I think that he has bribed the police…” (Interviewee no. 19, personal communication, November 24, 2021).

The above excerpt reveals a negative picture of the country's legal-administrative system. She was trafficked due to her lower socio-economic background and she is now deprived of justice for the same reason.

Moreover, under the 2012 Act, the government of Bangladesh had 592 recorded cases with 1,324 suspects until 2019, but the courts had not yet shown how many cases were prosecuted or continued from the previous periods.\(^76\)

Besides, there are not enough investigations into the corrupt immigration agencies: just 14 in 2017 and 15 in 2018, though the country has thousands of such agencies.\(^77\) Now, a question arises over the country’s legal system and whether it has been hamstrung by the influence of traffickers or their political bedfellows.

In fighting trafficking, law enforcement agencies such as the police, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), and Bangladesh Coast Guard (BCG) play important roles. The government of Bangladesh has started training programs for police, BGB, and BCG with advanced technology. Law enforcement does have records of arresting some traffickers and rescuing trafficked women. \(^78\) Figure 3 shows the number of arrests of suspected traffickers in each month of 2021.

\[\text{Figure 3. The number of arrestees of traffickers/suspected traffickers}\]

As seen in Figure 3, June and December were the peak months of arrests with 12 each while no suspected traffickers were detained in February, April, July, or September of 2021. It is remarkable to note that around half (23) of the total arrests in that year happened from October to December. There was a single arrest each in March and November whereas there were 4 and 3 arrests in May and August respectively.

It is important to note that the 2019 Human Trafficking Report of the U.S. Department of State revealed that there were a number of recorded cases where some police, BGB, and BCG personnel took bribes or sexual favors during the process of transnational trafficking of people, mainly women.\(^79\)

For instance, two BGB members seized trafficked girls from the Bangladesh-India border and raped them.\(^80\) Though the BGB commanding officer claimed this as a rumor, the two rapists have not yet faced any legal procedure, and police did not permit NGO personnel to inspect the victims in the hospital.\(^81\) This particular case demonstrates that if law enforcement agencies maintain a transparent standing regarding the issue, their image would be tarnished by a third party (in this case, an NGO). These loopholes inside law enforcement agencies provide the needed...
incentive and permission for trafficking gangs.

Furthermore, the 2020 Trafficking in Persons Report of the U.S. Department of State mentioned the direct engagements of some politicians and lawmakers in human trafficking.\textsuperscript{82} A glaring example can be drawn from Mohammad Shahid Islam, a Bangladeshi Parliamentarian, who has been accused of money laundering and human trafficking including women through his migration agency, and is now in custody in Kuwait.\textsuperscript{83}

This section has demonstrated that the government of Bangladesh has undertaken several crucial steps in fighting the trafficking of women; however, the ineffectiveness and inefficiency of the legal and administrative systems of the country could not deter the growth of trafficking networks. It has also pointed out that the government commits direct and indirect violence against women, whether trafficked or not.

**Conclusion**

The study has examined the trafficking of Bangladeshi women under a feminist human-security framework. It has found a nexus between supply and demand side factors triggering women’s trafficking from Bangladesh. On the supply side, trafficking in the context of Bangladesh is significantly gendered because of its gendered socio-economic practices, which persistently generate female trafficking victims. On the demand side, globalization has accelerated the trafficking of women because of the diverse needs of the global economic market, such as the booming sex industry, forced labor, and the human organ business. The combination of the supply and demand sides has been an issue of concern because as long as this remains intact, the fight against trafficking will not reach a desired end.

Moreover, the study has investigated the role of non-state actors in the trafficking of Bangladeshi women. Non-state actors (trafficking gang members) commit direct and indirect violence against trafficked women and traffickers to employ the strategy of familiarity-induced credibility to trap women in trafficking. Trafficking of women is conducted in two important ways: from brokers to traffickers to a trafficking/criminal syndicate; and from traffickers to a trafficking/criminal syndicate.

Furthermore, the study has scrutinized the role of Bangladesh’s government in preventing the trafficking of women. It has shown that Bangladesh’s government commits indirect violence in social, political, and economic domains, which can make an underprivileged or poor woman susceptible to traffickers. Law enforcement agencies of Bangladesh’s government often also commit direct violence against women during and after trafficking. The role of Bangladesh’s government is not adequate to prevent the trafficking of women due to its ineffective and inefficient legal and administrative system, notwithstanding some significant improvements in recent years. Also, it appears that the basic principle of the politics-administration paradigm in state affairs is absent in Bangladesh since there is no clear segregation between its political and administrative systems.

Considering the overall findings of the study, it makes eight recommendations for Bangladesh to improve the human security of its women:

1. Making the country’s legal system fairer and speedier and promptly yet carefully handling the backlog of trafficking cases;
2. Maintaining strong monitoring of immigration agencies in the country;
3. Strengthening the cyber-policing of Bangladesh’s police force to halt and identify online and technology-facilitated trafficking.
4. Beefing up security in the country’s transit points where trafficking is known to occur;
5. Strengthening the country’s cooperation at regional and global levels in fighting human trafficking;
6. Enhancing the access of women, particularly vulnerable ones, to education, healthcare, politics, and public religious service to reduce structural violence against them;
7. Integrating more women into the country’s economy; and
8. Raising awareness among women to combat trafficking through television, social media, advertising, and awareness sessions.

Making these changes would improve the security of the women of Bangladesh.

About the Authors:
Shuva Das has experience working as a Research Associate at the Bangladesh Institute of Social Research (BISR) Trust, Bangladesh, and as the Editor-in-Chief at the Atlas Institute for International Affairs, UK. He obtained his BSS and MSS degrees in International Relations from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University, Gopalganj, Bangladesh. Email: shuvadasbsmrstu@gmail.com

Leo S.F. Lin is currently an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Department of Criminal Justice, Ming-Chuan University, Taiwan. He is a former affiliate lecturer at the School of Social & Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, UK. He obtained his Ph.D. degree from the School of Social Science and Global Studies, the University of Southern Mississippi, USA. Email: lin.leonidas@gmail.com.
29 Watson and Silkstone, “Human Trafficking.”
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 McKay, ‘Women, human security’.
39 M. Q. Patton, Qualitative research and evaluation methods (California, USA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2015).
40 Ibid.
43 Rahman, “Human Trafficking”.


Rahman, “Human Trafficking”.

S. Nasrin, *Nari Pachar: Pacharkarider Voyongkor Opokousol o Protiroder Khamti* (“Trafficking of Women: Traffickers’ terrible tactics and lack of Resistance”), *DW*, October 8, 2021, https://www.dw.com/bn/%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%93%E0%A6%B2%E0%A7%8F%E0%A6%A8/%E0%A7%8F%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%93%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%9E%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AA%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%95/

Ibid.


Ibid.


Man, *Trafficking in Human*.  
Ibid.

United States Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons*.  
Ibid.


Ibid.

United States Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons*.  
Ibid.

Based on online archives, from January 2021 to December 2021, of prominent Bangladeshi newspapers such as *The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, and Dhaka Tribune*

United States Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons*.  
Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.